

A Light “In the Days of Herod the King”

Epiphany Sun. – 01/9/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Texts: Isaiah 60:1–6, Matthew 2:1–12 Past. Keith Besel

v.1 [Isaiah calls out to the people of God, “**Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.**”]

Introduction

✘ Well, as of Wednesday the 12 Days of Christmas have now passed and on Thursday a new season began – Epiphany! The term “Epiphany” means to unveil or reveal something, as if we are shining a bright light upon that which has been hidden in the dark. Those who have been around me for a while know how I like to define the meaning of Epiphany. Epiphany means ... “A-ha!”

→ Why do we say, “A-ha”? Now that we have celebrated Christ’s birth as the Light of the Word; as God in the flesh who has come to reveal our hidden and ignored sin and deal with it in the bright light and glory of His Gospel work, we use the season of Epiphany to learn more and more about who this baby Jesus is and what He has come to do. In that sense Epiphany is actually an extension of Christmas.

✘ But, these joyous seasons of Christmas and Epiphany have a dark side too. If, for example, you used a lot of credit card plastic to support your holiday observances, then you soon will know that small corner of Christmas darkness when the inevitable cloud of monthly statements descends upon you.

→ In today’s Gospel Reading we learn again that darkness has been a part of Christmas from the beginning. At the start of that story about the wise men, called “Magi” in the original Greek, we heard the clue. Verse one tells us that after Jesus was born, the Wise Men came “in the days of Herod the king”.

✘ There are a number of kings named Herod in the Bible. The first is the one that we also know as *Herod the Great*. He became Roman Governor or “King” over the area of the Holy Land approximately 35-40 years before Jesus’ birth. He’s the one that Matthew is talking about here; the one of whom the Magi asked “Where is He who has been born king of the Jews?” (Mat. 2:2).

→ The problem is that Herod was a paranoid and diabolical man. He believed that members of his own family were out to kill him so that they could have his throne. So he beat them to it – killing his own wife, Miriamne along with prominent members of her family and even killing his own two sons. In fact the Romans had a joke that they passed around. It was a play on words because the word “pig” and “sons” sound alike in the Greek. It went like this, “Better to be Herod’s ‘pig’ than his ‘sons’.”

→ Well, now that the Magi came into Herod’s kingdom and asked him about a new “king” being born, Herod’s paranoia is all stoked up. Sadly their visit cost the blood of every male child in and around Bethlehem and the tears and anguish of those babies’ mothers and fathers as well. We know of course though that Jesus’ blood was spared as they fled to Egypt in the nick of time.

✘ It’s into this world filled with darkness, jealousy, hatred, cruelty, and terror, that our Gospel tells us about the star that brought the wise men to Jerusalem and ultimately to Bethlehem; shining its light; the light of God’s glory in all its brightness.

I. Herod’s Rule Is Ancient.

- ⊗ But you see, Matthew’s story of light and darkness has roots that reach far back into the history of God’s people – at least as far as the words from Isaiah 60 in our Old Testament Reading today.
 - ➔ In the middle of the thick darkness that envelops all nations, we see that the glory of the Lord arises over Zion. Verse one says that Zion’s “light has come”. What are the signs of this glory? Verse three says that all nations shall come to Jerusalem. Verse six says those non-Hebrews will “bring gold” and other precious things. So much wealth would flow into Zion that it would require as verse six says, “a multitude of camels” to haul it.
- ⊗ And if we had continued reading in Isaiah 60; we would see that the vision also includes innumerable flocks coming into Jerusalem to lay themselves down on the altar of the temple as a voluntary sacrifice (60:7). Looking even further into this vision, we hear of Gentiles coming to make themselves slaves to the people of Zion. Foreigners and their kings would do all the work, while the people of Israel remain free to worship. Chapter 60:10-12 says that any foreigners who failed to serve would be destroyed.
 - ➔ The idea of a star shining brightly has its roots all the way back to the Book of Numbers where Balaam, the prophet who went astray from God but was brought back to a faithful role when God spoke to him and straightened him out by talking to him through the mouth of Balaam’s own donkey. Balaam prophesied in Numbers 24:17,19: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”. And then he says that “[This star] shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth” who had survived in Jerusalem.
- ⊗ Well, this was what it meant to live in the time of King Herod the Great, for his way of ruling – because of its paranoid nature – meant that the long-awaited light, when it would finally come and shine upon the people, must surely plunge someone else into darkness.
 - ➔ It’s understandable for these people to think, from a human, self-centered perspective, that if a new star appears in the heavens; if a new ruler shows up on the earth, then he is the one who must have come to vindicate *us* – or at least *me*, right? If not, then what’s the point of the star? It is sinful mankind that assumes this new light; this new “king” must be coming to destroy the oppressive king and the corrupt government – otherwise what good is that light at all. And in this way they miss the true Light, just as Herod did.

II. Herod Rules Still Today.

- ⊗ But friends, we live, and our babies are born, during the time of King Herod as well. You see, his rule of fear is everywhere about us. We see it far away, in places where onetime victims get vengeance on their vanquished persecutors, or other cowardly types wreak violence merely to bring vengeance or vindication to pay for some way that they believe they’ve been wronged.
 - ➔ And Herod rules nearby as well – in our own homes; among our extended families; in our places of work. Only you know what kind of traps you may have laid or time-delayed poisons you set up in some of the things you said and did during this recent holiday season. The reign of fear; the lust for vengeance; and dreams of delicious vindication are deceptive and sneaky ... and everywhere.
- ⊗ Indeed, even those of us whom our Lord Jesus called “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” are part of the darkness as well, because of our original sinful nature. Yes, when we slip and fall to sin under the cover of darkness then we too, work for Herod.

III. Epiphany’s Alternative to Herod’s Rule

- ✘ But Isaiah calls all of God's people from all the nations in verse one to "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you". Dear Christians, you and I are the ones whom He is calling to wake up and shine! We are the people whom God has brought into His New Jerusalem, out of all the "nations".
 - ➔ So, how can you and I shine God's light, because divine light cannot be humanly generated! We can only arise and shine because our Light has already come to us and is coming again. In Luke 2:9 we're told that this happened at Jesus' birth, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them". Simeon celebrated in the temple when he first saw the 40-day old Jesus and said, "A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel" (Lk. 2:32).
 - ➔ And now in our Gospel Reading today we hear the Magi marvel and proclaim, "We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him" (Mat. 2:2).
- ✘ What a light show! Majesty came bursting in to the middle of the mundane. The most holy God appeared in the flesh in the presence of cattle manure! God in all of His glory entered the world on the floor of a stable; through the womb of a teenage virgin; and in the presence of a lowly carpenter.
 - ➔ Yes, Jesus is the Light of the world, who took on flesh so that He might take you into His arms, heal your hurts, forgive your filth, and destroy your darkness. The Son of God became a human being, not to demonstrate the innocence of infancy, but to live the life we could not; to die our death so that we need not!
 - ➔ Here is dazzling light; brilliant light; and eternal light. This is the only way that you and I can confess as we did earlier in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is "God of God, Light of Light".
- ✘ But we can't only look backward at King Herod and the Magi in Matthew's Epiphany story. We must look forward as well, for there is another group of seekers that enter into Jerusalem.
 - ➔ Matthew says that the whole city "was troubled" with fear and confusion at this time as well. And yes, once again the soldiers are dispatched as agents of terror.
 - ➔ Indeed, a Lamb of the flock comes again into Jerusalem and lays Himself down on the altar, making a voluntary sacrifice on behalf of all the people. This time though it is a humble King, riding on a donkey coming as the Servant of all. Yes, this time the Bethlehem Child who escaped the first Herod, now falls victim to the governor Pilate during the reign of a later Herod.
- ✘ This Child, Jesus, is our Star; the Scepter rising over us. Into Him we are baptized and thereby adopted into the people of Zion; into what the Bible calls the "New Jerusalem".
 - ➔ In baptism we share in His rule by first dying His death here in the sin-centered, earthly time of King Herod.
- ✘ And by faith, we have seen His star; a true light that shines in the darkness. It shines with the glory of His grace; with the brilliance of His undeserved love for us all. That star shines here, in our midst through the proclamation of His Word and the reception of His sacramental meal. And we shine. We display His glory among each other as we respond to His gifts in songs of praise and prayers and proclamations of our faith in Him.
 - ➔ And it is not only here in this place that His glory shines. For surely you have seen Christ's light in other places; through other Christians; in His many mighty acts of care and compassion; in His exhibitions of mercy and miraculous intervention each day in this world.
- ✘ We shine because this Child, who escaped the first Herod only to die at the hands of the second, works something of the reverse in us. We die with Him so that we might escape the deadly rule of the next Herod, the devil himself.

→ And because we walk in and bask in Christ's light we do not give in to the darkness. No, Christ's Spirit works in us for two things. First He keeps us in the light of forgiveness and grace. And second, He works in us the gift of bringing His light to others. Where there is hatred, we now speak the language of forgiveness and love. Where there is jealousy, we now respond in generosity. Where there is fear and loneliness, we now seek and find the courage to be signs of hope.

✘ And in joy we approach our King with the Magi; with the nations, bringing our gold and frankincense before the manger. How is that? Oh, the forms and methods are many, but they come in the form of things like joy-filled offerings, prayers of praise, and sharing the bread and cup with our fellow believers in Christ.

→ And as we leave today, we no longer walk the way of darkness as Herod demanded, but we go as the wise men did following the Light that has come among us and shining His radiance far and wide. Yes, we live in His light and we shine His light, for the glory is His forever. Amen.